

BOOK REVIEW: SOUTH ASIA: A PLACE WHERE POLICY AND PRACTICE ARE INCOMPATIBLE

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Abstract

With a focus on its examination of the persistent discrepancy between language policy and classroom practice throughout South Asia, this book review *highlights Multilingual Education in South Asia: At the Intersection of Policy and Practice*. The volume emphasizes translanguaging and culturally responsive pedagogy while illuminating how colonial legacies inequality and the nuanced role of English impact multilingual education through regional case studies. Additionally, it provides comparative analysis for linguistically heterogeneous settings, like Indonesia promoting socially equitable and contextually aware teaching methods.

Multilingual Education in South Asia: At the Intersection of Policy and Practice. (2022). L. Adinolfi, U. Bhattacharya, and P. Phyak (Eds.).

Introduction

One of the world's most linguistically and culturally diverse regions, South Asia is characterized by both long-standing intellectual traditions and significant upheavals brought about by colonialism and the establishment of postcolonial states. The edited book *Multilingual Education in South Asia: Where Policies and Practices Do Not Meet* provides a pertinent and insightful analysis of the arguments surrounding language-in-education policy in this area. The book significantly advances research on multilingual education, linguistic inequality and educational justice in the Global South by highlighting the enduring gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. South Asia's linguistic legacy is thousands of years older than the current educational system.

Modern linguistic theory is still influenced by classical grammatical traditions especially those related to Pāṇini (5th–6th century BCE), particularly in phonology and morphology.

Among the longest-running literate traditions in the world are Sanskrit and Tamil which reflect deeply ingrained pedagogical and epistemological practices. These customs show that long before European colonial education arrived South Asia had highly developed systems for producing knowledge. But this intellectual ecology was drastically changed by colonial intervention. In the volume's foreword, Canagarajah points out that South Asian languages have historically represented unique social relations, cosmologies and value systems with Sanskrit serving as a transregional scholarly communication medium. By emphasizing English as the language of modernity, government and intellectual authority, colonial education systematically replaced these customs. Macaulay's (1835) *Minute on Indian Education* which sought to develop subjects who were both culturally Indian and intellectually in line with British values clearly outlined this change. As a result, English language instruction was used to change people's identities and justify colonial authority (Macaulay & Young, 1935).

Crucially neither the romanticization of precolonial linguistic traditions nor the reduction of colonial influence to a single moment of rupture are found in the book under review. Rather it emphasizes how colonial hierarchies continue to shape educational systems long after political independence by placing current language education debates within a *longue durée* perspective. Despite being imposed as a superior linguistic code, English underwent changes as a result of contact with indigenous languages giving rise to regional variations that complicate oversimplified claims of linguistic dominance.

Under the influence of international policy frameworks like Education for All the Right to Education Act and the Sustainable Development Goals South Asian states have implemented significant educational reforms in the postcolonial era. These programs prioritize quality equity and access frequently presenting education as a means of promoting social mobility and economic growth. However, increased educational access has not resulted in equitable learning outcomes as the volume persuasively illustrates. It is still very difficult to guarantee literacy for everyone, especially in settings with a high degree of linguistic diversity. Large class sizes, exam-focused curricula and inadequate teacher preparation make it challenging to implement learner-centered pedagogy participatory classrooms and learner autonomy—often touted as universal best practices. Using a single language and method can jeopardize students' competence because learners do have varied interests and each class is heterogenous (Sherma, 2023; Phyak & Ojha, 2019). Additionally, conflicting local national and international language priorities put educators and policymakers in a nearly impossible situation. In particular, English plays a paradoxical role since it is portrayed as both a source of exclusion and a tool for empowerment (Adinolfi et al., 2020).

The edited collection offers a regionally grounded but theoretically informed analysis of language-in-education policy by combining case studies from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. In my opinion, the chosen case studies from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan provide a fairly representative regional snapshot while capturing the substantial linguistic political and educational diversity found in South Asia. In contrast, the lack of smaller or less well-documented contexts (e. g. limiting full regional coverage (e. g. Bhutan or

the Maldives) include significant policy paths, colonial legacies and multilingual realities that influence language-in-education discussions. The case studies seem to be methodologically sound with empirical data and critical policy analysis, bolstering their foundation in regional sociopolitical contexts. Although the collection cannot claim to be an exhaustive representation of the whole South Asian landscape, it does overall offer a credible and balanced regional understanding. The book's methodological approach is one of its main advantages. The contributors emphasize ground-level viewpoints, drawing on the experiences of educators, students, school administrators and local communities rather than favoring top-down policy analysis. This strategy is consistent with recent research in academic literacy and language policy which highlights how educational practice is situated (Lea & Street, 1998). The volume's main goal is to highlight the practical and identity-related effects of implementing language policies. The authors show how language policies, even when presented in inclusive or progressive terms frequently perpetuate inequality through routine practices throughout the chapters. The book can go beyond abstract policy and critique in favor of a more nuanced understanding of how linguistic hierarchies are enacted, resisted and negotiated in classrooms, thanks to its emphasis on lived experience. Wijesekera and Hamid (2022) who look at the function of language instruction in post-conflict Sri Lanka write one of the most interesting chapters. A paradox at the core of mother-tongue instruction is revealed by their analysis. In Sri Lanka, teaching in one's native tongue unintentionally strengthened ethnic divisions between the Sinhala Tamil and Muslim communities despite the fact that this approach is generally considered pedagogically sound.

Linguistically divided public schools hindered opportunities for interethnic communication and reinforced the very divisions that led to conflict. Due to a lack of qualified teachers and institutional support, the government's attempt to address this issue through second national language policies—which required Sinhala speakers to learn Tamil and vice versa—was mainly unsuccessful. On the other hand, more promising results were obtained from bilingual education programs that used English in addition to Sinhala or Tamil. English served as an “impartial third space,” allowing students from various ethnic backgrounds to work together without favoring one group over another. The authors do, however, correctly warn against celebrating English without question. They contend that English functions as a two-edged sword, empowering those who have access to it while further marginalizing those who do not based on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital.

The volume's recurring tension emphasizes the importance of meticulous context-sensitive language planning. Several chapters concentrate on the highly multilingual classrooms in India where translanguaging techniques have become effective teaching strategies. Translanguaging is not always specifically mentioned in India's national education policy but its tenets are becoming more in line with changes in the law that support mother tongue-based instruction and multilingualism, especially in early childhood education. Translanguaging practices are indirectly justified by frameworks like recent curriculum and language-in-education reforms that place an emphasis on flexible language use, regional language inclusion and

pedagogies that support learners linguistic repertoires. However, assessment policies gaps in teacher preparation and the ongoing prestige of English-medium instruction, all contribute to uneven implementation. Translanguaging is therefore in a space where it is partially recognized by policy but is becoming more and more accepted in education.

According to Mahboob and Lin (2016), using learners' native tongues strategically can help with comprehension, scaffold academic material and encourage higher-order thinking. Local languages are seen as important cultural and cognitive resources rather than as barriers to learning English. Lightfoot et al.'s chapter provides additional examples of how educators in multilingual Indian settings actively use students' linguistic repertoires to co-create knowledge. Teachers incorporate new linguistic practices without devaluing students' native tongues by using collaborative learning strategies and the methodical application of comprehensible input. These results are consistent with a larger body of research on translanguaging that questions the monolingual ideologies that are ingrained in formal education (Canagarajah, 2013; Islam, 2015). In contrast to these more optimistic accounts, chapters on Nepal present a grim picture of English Medium Instruction (EMI). EMI is being promoted more and more as a path to modernity, global competitiveness, and socioeconomic mobility. However, contributors demonstrate that EMI often exacerbates racial, gender, and class imbalances that already exist. The Madhesi and other linguistically oppressed communities are caught between the supremacy of English and Nepali. Because their languages are rarely used in formal education, their identities are concealed in scholarly discourse. Policies that purport to support mother-tongue education are nevertheless difficult to implement because of budget constraints and conflicting ideological priorities. There is a gap between policy rhetoric and classroom instruction in rural and peripheral places where English is still mostly unavailable but is linked with prestige.

The book's analysis of Pakistan emphasizes the continuing consequences of colonial language hierarchies. English and Urdu continue to occupy the top positions, pushing local languages to the margins. Despite being an official language and a prerequisite for work, English is socially discouraged in everyday conversation, creating a contradictory linguistic environment. This chapter raises significant concerns about equity and access. How can pupils be expected to learn English without making use of their existing linguistic and cultural resources? By reinforcing the connection between elite position and English ability, the marginalization of regional languages not only impedes education but also maintains social stratification.

Not all of the chapters deal with inequality and limitations. Stanley A. John's research on early bilingual education for tribal children in India offers compelling evidence of the long-term benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy. By using their native tongues and cultural traditions in the classroom, teachers were able to challenge deficit narratives that portray tribal pupils as underachievers. The findings demonstrate that pupils who were exposed to bilingual education in their early years outperformed their counterparts in several topics when they were later in school. The claims that learning indigenous languages hinders academic achievement are persuasively refuted in this chapter. In a similar vein, Manocha's analysis of Odisha's MLE and MLE Plus initiatives shows how revolutionary community-based education can be.

The book also addresses language policy in higher education, particularly in light of Rahman and Phyak's negative evaluation of Objective-Based Education (OBE) in Bangladesh. The authors argue that whereas OBE disproportionately benefits children from English-medium backgrounds, it disadvantages pupils who attend Bangla-medium institutions. Structural constraints including centralized curricula, traditional assessment techniques, and insufficient staff training make implementation more challenging. This argument highlights a recurring theme in the book: policy interventions often make unrealistic assumptions about idealized situations. If fundamental inequities and institutional limits are not addressed, even well-intentioned programs run the risk of sustaining exclusion.

Multilingual Education in South Asia provides a richly detailed description of the linguistic landscapes of the region written in an approachable yet academic style. Its focus on the gap between policy and practice is consistent with current criticisms of technocratic methods of educational reform.

This information provides readers in Indonesia with a comparative viewpoint on how multilingual education policies are balanced between South Asian classroom realities and national frameworks. Given Indonesia's own linguistic diversity and continuous attempts to strike a balance between local language inclusion and national language unity, these parallels are especially beneficial. Therefore, Indonesian educators and policymakers looking for more adaptable inclusive approaches to multilingual instruction can benefit from the discussion of context-sensitive language planning and translanguaging-oriented pedagogy. Overall, the book review offers knowledge that is pertinent to the region which encourages thoughtful policy discussions and innovative teaching practices in Indonesia's multilingual educational system.

The book emphasizes the moral and political aspects of language instruction much like Melo-Pfeifer's (2018) research on mother-tongue-based multilingualism. Although the book would benefit from more extensive quantitative research and a wider range of countries covered, these shortcomings do not substantially lessen their value. Its strength is found in its critical orientation, contextual depth and dedication to elevating local voices. The volume provides insightful information for scholars' policymakers and practitioners alike by illustrating how language policies are lived contested and reinterpreted in regular educational contexts. All things considered this edited compilation represents a significant addition to the body of knowledge regarding South Asian language-in-education policy. It calls for more contextually grounded, socially just approaches to language instruction, challenges, oversimplified narratives of multilingualism and highlights the inconsistencies present in reform initiatives.

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